

God's Economics in a World that Does Not Understand

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells stories, parables, using images and metaphors to open our lives to the kingdom of heaven that is all around us. Over and over again Jesus begins by saying "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and then he launches into a story. All of these stories that he tells are ticking bombs, little packages of divine dynamite waiting to explode into our lives and reorient our understanding of who God is and how God's upside down kingdom works. The kingdom of heaven is like a shepherd who abandons 99 sheep to search and recover one that is lost...like a merchant who sells all her product to buy one pearl...like a farmer who sells all his land to buy one field...like a planter who wastes much of his seed on rocky soil. Call it what you like, bad economics, poor farming, sloppy business practice, creative accounting. The kingdom of heaven is predictably unpredictable.

Today's story is the last of what are called the kingdom parables. It is one of my favorites. A landowner goes out in the marketplace early in the morning to hire workers for the vineyard. After a couple of hours, the landowner goes back out and hires more. Then again at noon more are hired, and in the middle of the afternoon, still more are brought into the vineyard. This landowner desperately wants everyone to work, and not leave anyone out.

Finally, an hour before quitting time, the landowner goes out once more to the market-square and discovers still more workers standing around. The landowner says to the last group, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They respond with one of the most painful lines in all of scripture... "Because no one has hired us." The text does not tell us *why* they weren't hired. Perhaps they didn't have the necessary skills to do the job. Maybe they didn't speak the language...or didn't have an education, or didn't have a green card. Maybe they couldn't afford bus fare that morning and had to walk, arriving late...We don't know. Whatever the reason,

here they are, unemployed, left out, forgotten. Thus the landowner says to the un-hired workers, “You also go into the vineyard.”

When pay time in the vineyard comes, the landowner puts them in a line. The ones who had only been on the job an hour, aren’t even breathing hard...they haven’t even loosened up their muscles or dirtied their hands. While the ones hired at dawn are dripping with the grime and sweat of a hard 12 hour day. The landowner starts paying the workers, starting with the last ones to be hired. When the exhausted first-comers see that the late-comers received a full day’s pay for an hour’s work, they get upset. When they arrive at the front of the line and receive the same wage, their exhaustion turns to anger. “What kind of business owner are you? Don’t you know the basics of incentive and reward?! We’re the ones with the sunburns, the blisters and the pulled muscles. Not only do you pay us last but you pay us the same! We deserve better!”

Now, anyone who has taken a course in basic economics knows that this is no way to make a dollar. It is not just bad business, it

isn't fair! Work plus effort *equals* production, and production *equals* pay. Such is the economy that drives our lives. Those who are in the highest demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills, deserve the first and greatest reward.

And yet, this parable suggests that if we use *God's understanding of economics*, there is something even greater than incentive and reward, even more beautiful than the best run business. And that is GRACE. The story, you see, is about God's generosity, about the lavish *grace* of a God who wants everyone inside the vineyard. It is about a God who will not stop rushing out into the marketplace until all have been rounded up, all have been included in the work of the vineyard, even if it takes all day.

But this is not the end of our understanding of God's math and economics. In the economy of God's grace it is the same people who are hired at day's end who are first to receive God's generosity. In the kingdom of God the last become first in line. The outsiders

become the insiders. The poor, the forgotten, the left out, those hired last, are the ones that are closest to God's heart.

And you and I know what it is like to be left out, don't we?

Remember when you were on the playground as a child and the two captains began to pick teams? I certainly do...Summer afternoons in the early 60's at the Westside Park baseball diamond... "I'll take her...I've got him...You come over here...Okay, I guess we're stuck with Newby!" The whole time, as you are watching the others get picked in front of you, your insides were churning with shame and embarrassment. Or when you were in high school or college and mustered up the courage to go to the dance even though you didn't have a date. There you sat, alone on a folding chair through the entire evening, doing your best to show confidence, but inside you were crying... "Don't forget me...I'm here." There you sat, desperately hoping that somebody, anybody, would come over and ask you to dance...to join the party. I love the definition of inclusivity and diversity: Diversity is being invited to the

party...Inclusivity is being invited to dance. There is nothing that hurts more than feeling like you don't belong, than being left out. And Friends, this is what our Native American, African American and Hispanic brothers and sisters are telling us about America...They have been left out.

If we look at this parable through the lens of family life, God has a family, the people of Israel, and then God says to the outsiders, the Gentiles, to us Quakers and other Christians, "I want you to be a part of this family"...God is like a loving mother or father at dinner time who just can't stand having any of their children away from the table.

I have a collection of the works of William Faulkner, which are very difficult to read because he writes in a southern dialect. I was, however, years ago, able to get through his book, *The Sound and the Fury*. It is a novel about a prestigious family in Old South Mississippi during the first half of the 20th Century. The younger son, Benjy, however, is left out. He is ridiculed for not being smart

enough, for not living up to the great “Compson” family name. But the maid, Dilsey, also an outsider, really loves Benjy. She says to him, “Tell them the good Lord don’t care whether you’re smart or not.” His real name is not even Benjy, but they changed it to Benjy when they realized that he wouldn’t be a “real Compson.” Dilsey asserts that Benjy’s name is fine, saying, “My name been Dilsey since before I could remember, and it will be Dilsey when they have long forgot me.” The Compson daughter asks snidely, “How will they know it’s Dilsey when it’s long forgot?” Dilsey says, “It’ll be in the book, honey, writ out.” The daughter chides her, knowing that Dilsey can’t read. “Can you read it?” Dilsey fires back, “Won’t have to. They’ll read it for me. All I got to do is say, “I am here...I am here.”

To the forgotten workers in the marketplace, to the Benjys and Dilseys of the world, to all who for whatever reason have been left out due to greed or systemic racism, to all of those migrants and undocumented workers who are out there in the fields picking

vegetables and fruits for our dinner table and are crying, “I am here!” Jesus stretches his arms out wide, saying, “You’re hired. And the beloved community of Cincinnati Friends Meeting, living the truth of our "All Are Welcome" sign on our front yard, reaches out to all who have been treated unjustly and who need forgiveness and a break in this life, saying, " Come into the vineyard, come into the family, be a part of our team, and *take your place at the front of the line.*”